

Hi, my name is Mighty Fine, I'm an expert with the American Public Health Association, and today we're going to talk about environmental health.

In the early 20th century, Americans often drank dirty water, ate contaminated food and dealt with infestations of disease-carrying animals.

So it may not surprise us to learn that cholera, typhoid and other infectious diseases — which spread when things like bacteria or viruses infect one person and pass to another — were the leading cause of death in the U.S. back then.

This was before antibiotics and widespread vaccination, so to prevent disease, the best strategy to tackle these issues was to change the environment.

Which we did through a number of initiatives, like creating pest control programs, building cleaner water systems and passing food safety laws.

And they worked! From 1900 to 1940, U.S. deaths from infectious disease went down by more than 75%.

This collection of initiatives grew into a branch of public health called environmental health, which focuses on the relationships between people and their environment to promote health and well-being.

But as the U.S. has changed and the leading causes of death have shifted, the goals of environmental health have broadened, too.

In the 21st century, environmental health monitors the natural environment—like air, water, soil and food—and promotes health through the built environment—like the safety of our housing, transportation, roads and parks.

Environmental health is a national issue, but in practice, local governments are the ones who take action because they have the clearest picture of their communities' needs and the most direct power to respond to them.

That might mean inspecting a restaurant for food safety, measuring the amount of toxic pollutants in our air, or identifying areas in the community where someone might get injured. Local health officials may even consult with new homeowners and connect residents with certified contractors to make their homes safer from things like lead exposure and asthma triggers. After all, our homes are a key part of our everyday environment.

But some problems are bigger in scale, so environmental health professionals need to work with other sectors to help people get the resources they need to live their healthiest lives. Like by offering government subsidies to grocery stores or restaurants with healthy and affordable food, so they can operate in low-income neighborhoods.

Or building well-maintained systems of sidewalks and bike lanes, which can encourage people to walk, bike, or roll. That means less local pollution from cars and a more active community. Unfortunately, people's health is often impacted by the racism that's embedded in our laws and society, which drives an unequal investment in communities of color.

So white neighborhoods usually end up with the most well-maintained parks, the nicest bike lanes and the positive health outcomes associated with those resources.

Meanwhile, communities of color, foreign-born communities and low-income communities are more likely to be exposed to the environmental hazards — like unsafe levels of lead in drinking water and constant noise pollution.

Together, these environmental factors can cause health disparities, which are differences in health that are rooted in unfair and unequal access to resources.

In fact, a 2019 study found that our zip codes can predict certain health outcomes like obesity or mental illness better than our genes. And in cities across the nation, certain neighborhoods have life expectancies 10-30 years shorter than neighborhoods only a few miles away.

According to APHA, to make sure everyone is living their healthiest lives, the U.S. should strive for environmental justice, which is a movement that seeks to eliminate the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on ethnic minorities, low-income communities and other underserved groups.

So environmental justice can look like making sure the community approves the location and safety measures for new developments, addressing active threats to health like poorly maintained landfills and working with local residents on what they think will improve their environment.

The end goal is for all people to be protected from environmental hazards and have equal access to resources which promote healthy living.

So environmental health means paying attention to how all the places we work, play and live are affecting people's health—by monitoring health threats, building better infrastructure and involving the community in local decisions—to help ensure everyone's health and well-being. Thanks for watching! This video is part of a series created by Complexly and the American Public Health Association to shed a little light on the important work that public health does. To learn more, visit apha.org.

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